THE GOD WHO IS
September 12, 2010

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Psalm 14
Exodus 3:1–15

"God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.'"
Exodus 3:14 (NRSV)

We are talking too much about God these days
and what we say is often facile. . . . We tend to
tame and domesticate God's otherness. We regularly
ask God to give us a fine day for our picnic.
Politicians quote God to justify their policies
and terrorists commit atrocities in his name.
We beg God to support our side in an election,
even though our opponents are, presumably,
also God's children. . . . . Despite our scientific
and technological brilliance, our religious thinking
is sometimes remarkably underdeveloped.

Karen Armstrong
The Case for God

It has been the human obsession since the beginning of time: Does God exist? Is there a supreme being? Is there anything other than what we can see and hear and taste and feel? Is anyone there? Is there any purpose, any meaning to all this, beyond our relatively few years on earth doing the best we can?

From ancient cave drawings to the earliest rituals of music and dance, human beings have not only asked the question but expressed a deep longing, a profound need, for something more. It is the underlying question in all philosophy, from ancient Greece—Plato and Aristotle—to Nietzsche and Marx and Bertrand Russell. And it is the issue still, with recent best sellers arguing that the answer is no, there is no God and the entire pursuit and enterprise of religion is a distraction, a massive waste of time including, obviously, your being here this morning rather than walking on the lakefront or enjoying Sunday morning television, which, I keep discovering on those occasions when I am unoccupied, is pretty good.

Two popular best sellers present the case for atheism: Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great*. There have, of course, been many responses from a thousand pulpits. I will add to that verbiage throughout the autumn. And there have been scholarly responses as well. Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God* is a thorough exploration of how the issue has played out down through history.

One of my favorite expressions of the issue is in a John Updike novel, *Roger's Version*. Roger Lambert is a theology professor at a New England divinity school that sounds like Harvard. Dale Kohler is a brilliant graduate student in physics. He makes an appointment with Professor Lambert to discuss a proposal for a grant from the divinity school to support the research he is certain will prove, once and for all, the existence of God.

Dale says, "What I'm coming to talk to you about is God as a fact, a fact about to burst upon us, right up out of nature." Roger is skeptical. Dale continues: he believes if he can crunch enough numbers, he will have the evidence necessary to solve the ancient riddle and put the question and skepticism to rest.

"God is breaking through," he says. "They've been scraping away at physical reality all these centuries, and now the layer of the little left we don't understand is so fine God's face is staring right out at us."

Roger's response is classic: "I must confess I find your whole idea aesthetically and ethically repulsive. Aesthetically because it describes a God who lets himself be intellectually trapped and ethically because it eliminates faith from religion, and it takes away our freedom to believe or doubt. A God you could prove makes the whole thing immensely, oh, uninteresting."

Richard Dawkins, a distinguished evolutionary biologist, argues that God is a delusion and religion is pernicious. His methodology is to identify the most bizarre, offensive examples of religion and use them to knock it down. It is easy to do. There are plenty of examples, from the Crusades to Mormons massacring their rivals, from the Taliban to Terry Jones burning the Koran. The fact is that the God Dawkins does not believe in, most people don't believe in.

Christopher Hitchens is a serious literary figure whose memoir, *Hitch 22*, is currently receiving rave reviews. He's in the news a lot because of his new book and the fact that he's very ill with esophageal cancer. Because he announced his atheism in his book *God Is Not Great*, everybody is asking him if he minds being prayed for—which he does not. Of course other people announce that his cancer is God's punishment for his atheism, which more or less proves the point of his book.

Hitchens, like Dawkins, sets up a straw man and knocks it down. It's great entertainment, but Hitchens doesn't seem to know a thing about serious Christian scholarship, seems not to know that believers have been asking the questions, struggling with them, all the way back to the beginning, to Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and right up to and including our own time —Paul Tillich, Karen Armstrong. The brightest and best of us have grappled and reasoned and analyzed and philosophized—and believed (see Terry Eagelton, *Religion, Reason, and Revolution*).

The new atheists have a point, however. The fact is that older, traditional, popular ideas of God do not work anymore, even for Christians. I don't believe in the God Richard Dawkins doesn't believe in. Marcus Borg says, "Over the past thirty or forty years, an older way of thinking about God—doctrinal, moralistic, literalistic, exclusivistic—has ceased to be compelling even to many Christians."

So where might we, twenty-first-century Christians who know about the expanding universe, the countless galaxies, who know about evolution and the Genome Project and DNA, where might we take up the eternal human question and quest in our time? Serious theology has always known a secret that is difficult to explain. For God to be God, God cannot be completely comprehended, cannot be limited by the limits of human reason. God is "more than." God transcends even our best, most brilliant theologies. Augustine knew it. "If you understand it, it is not God," he wrote. Aquinas, who came up with five philosophic arguments for the existence of God that are still studied, confessed that God finally remains a mystery. Luther talked about the God beyond knowing. Paul Tillich wrote, "God does not exist" in the same way a chair, a lamp, a hymnal, a person exists. Tillich put it provocatively: God doesn't exist; God is being itself; God is the ground of all being.

Fifty years ago Anglican theologian J.B. Phillips wrote a very popular book: *Your God Is Too Small*. That remains true. For many, God is too small to be taken seriously: a god who punishes sinners with cancer, a god who arranges parking places and the sale of your condo.

In his book *Does God Exist?,* Hans Küng says, "God is not a supermundane being above the clouds and stars. God is in the world and the world is in God."

I love what someone said: "God is the reason there is something rather than nothing."

And Elizabeth Johnson, Roman Catholic academic, has said, “The notion of God as one who embraces us, in whom we live and move and have our being, is so much more my sense of God than the grand old man in the sky.”

The Bible nowhere mounts an argument for the existence of God. “Fools say in their hearts, ‘there is no God,’” the psalmist wrote, but the Bible doesn’t argue the point or try to prove the case. What the Bible does is tell stories about people meeting God, people praising, praying to, pleading with, blaming, arguing with, negotiating with God.

Moses, watching sheep one day in the wilderness, sees a burning bush and hears a voice: “Remove your shoes; go back to Egypt and lead your people out of slavery.”

I love the moment when Moses says exactly what I would say: “Why me? I’d rather not. Maybe you could find someone else. I’d prefer staying right here.”

“I will go with you,” the voice says.

“All right, say I go—who shall I say sent me?” ”Oh, and by the way, who are you?”

Then comes the most profound sentence in the Bible. “I am WHO I AM. Tell them I AM has sent you.”

The Hebrew can be translated

I AM WHO I AM.
or
I will be who I will be.
or
I am the one who is.

The point is—and it is an important one—that the God of the Bible resists being defined too closely: no idols, no human representation of God, because any human representation, by its very nature, limits the reality of God. Even words. That is the genius of Hebrew religion: God doesn’t have a name beyond “I AM.” Ancient Jews never wrote or pronounced the name, the word *God.* In the original Hebrew, it is a list of consonants Y H W H (we pronounce it Jahweh, from which we get Jehovah, but they didn’t).

God remains above and beyond anything we can think, describe, or recognize. God is holy, which means “other.” God, in God’s essence, is beyond our knowing, a mystery—unless, of course, God decides to do something about it, to reach across the chasm, from the infinite to the finite,

to enter time and space, to track down Moses in the wilderness, to find Moses, to come to him, speak to him, engage him, and send him on a mission.

This is not an academic exercise for us. Jews and Christians and Muslims share the belief that God addresses and encounters humankind. God resists full definition, but God does come close.

The mystery of God remains, unless God reaches across and into human history and into your life and mine, and that is exactly what Christians believe: that the great unknowable reality has come in the birth, life, and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God, we believe, has revealed more than philosophic conclusions about omnipotence, power, creativity, energy. God, we believe, has revealed himself as all of that and one thing more, one word more than any other word: looking at Jesus, early Christians come to a stunning conclusion—God is love.

Søren Kierkegaard said, “A believer, after all, is someone in love” (see Eagelton, *Religion, Reason, and Revolution*). A believer is not someone who has finally got answers to all the questions, not someone who lives with intellectual certainty, but someone in love, hopelessly, head over heels in love.

This is not an abstraction for us. In fact, the God we believe in and trust has a way of coming to us and calling us to some task, some mission, calling us to love and serve, to live the precious gift of our lives as fully as possible, to live courageously and generously and joyously, to open our hearts and give our lives away,

Like it was for Moses in the wilderness, to believe in the reality of this God is to trust and to follow, to walk into the future. It’s not an intellectual conclusion, which once made can be put up on the shelf and ignored. It’s a commitment, a decision for God—not the God of the philosophers, but the God Jesus showed us was love. To believe in that God is like being in love. It is to live in God’s presence, to long for God, to rejoice in God, to love being with God. And it is to follow, to walk into the future trusting God with every day of our lives.

Thanks be to God.